Housing Needs

Barriers and Enablers to the Uptake of Visitable Housing in Canada: Stakeholder Perceptions

THE RESEARCH

The concept of visitability has been in play for over a decade. Visitability is about designing and building homes with basic features that provide access for everyone on the main level of the home. At a minimum, a visitable home has:

- a no-step entrance (at the front, back or side of the house);
- wider doorways and a clear passage on the main floor; and
- a main floor bathroom (or powder room) that can be accessed by visitors who use mobility devices.

The Canadian Centre for Disability Studies, visitable housing (VH) task forces and others have been working on promoting the concept nationwide. Despite these efforts, Canada has not achieved the same degree of traction for VH as the United States and other countries. This research is intended to help inform solutions for broadening and deepening the acceptance of visitability.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This research explored the question *"Why hasn't the concept of visitable housing been more widely accepted and practiced in Canada?"* Specific research questions included the following:

1. *What do housing stakeholders think about VH?*
2. *What are the barriers to the uptake of VH in Canada?*
3. What are the enablers of increased uptake of VH in Canada?

Participants were selected because of their knowledge of VH and in many cases, their previous and ongoing efforts to promote VH in Canada. A total of 35 key informants from four primary stakeholder groups (housing consumers/buyers, homebuilders, home developers, and policy makers/advocates) were interviewed. Participants came from four provinces where visitable housing was less known or not as well received (based on previous research): Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

FINDINGS

- There was general support for visitable housing (VH) as a simple, cost-effective way of increasing access and facilitating dialogue about accessibility and future needs.
- Three perceptions of VH were: VH is a means to support inclusion for people with disabilities, VH makes life easier for everyone and VH is a first step on a continuum of greater accessibility.
- Key barriers were identified including lack of awareness, societal attitudes and myths about visitable housing as well as lack of leadership and policy supports.

Barriers:

Participants from all sectors identified a number of issues that prevent broader acceptance and implementation of VH. While participants talked about barriers from their respective sectors, there were common themes that emerged:

- Lack of clarity around definition and elements of VH
- Limited awareness of VH
- Societal attitudes – aversion to infirmity
- Lack of market demand
- Lack of leadership – reluctance of policy makers to champion VH
- Confusion about policies, contradictory policies, inflexible bylaws
- Inadequate supply of VH and costs of retrofitting
- Developer/builder reluctance due to cost and risk

ENABLERS TO THE UPTAKE OF VH IN CANADA

A key enabler for increasing the uptake of VH in Canada, identified by interviewees from all sectors, was for change of mindset around VH, where VH and inclusion are seen as "the social norm" in Canada.

Five broad areas identified for action are as follows (see figure 1):

Figure 1: VisitAble housing enablers

Canada

CMHC SCHL

- Foster leadership and collaborative action: Many respondents noted the need for champions and leaders at all levels of government, as well as cross-sector collaboration—policy makers, builders and advocates—to gain traction for effective implementation at the local level.
- Clarify and reach consensus on the definition and criteria of visitable housing.
- Develop and implement strategies for marketing, education and advocacy. Educate developers and builders on the specs and function of visitable housing.
- Develop and implement appropriate policies that require, encourage and/or enable local implementation.
- Conduct and mobilize research.

"We need to applaud the people who are doing [VH], we need to support the people who are interested in doing it, and we need to educate the people who have no idea what it's about." [Consumer]

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE HOUSING INDUSTRY:

Policy makers, consumers and developers all have different perspectives on the rationale and necessity for promoting VH—whether it is about inclusion and quality of life for people with mobility issues; making life easier for everyone, or about providing one step along the accessibility continuum. While all valid, these perspectives imply different audiences and different (and perhaps conflicting) messaging and policy, education, marketing or advocacy approaches. Regardless, the common theme is to find ways to normalize VH for consumers and industry, and increase the supply and profile of VH.

This study was specifically designed to talk to those who have been working in VH particularly in areas of the country where there has been limited acceptance of VH to gain insight on what needs to change to foster broader acceptance. While there are many great advocates for VH in the industry, the government and among consumers, stronger leadership at senior levels and shared leadership between sectors may be needed to create broader change. Specifically, policy makers and advocates may find developers and builders who are champions of VH to be strong allies in furthering VH in Canada, particularly in the building industry. Despite the different views and objectives of policy makers/advocates and developers/builders, much could be gained by working collaboratively.

"Quick little case studies, very simple, quick to the point and getting [builders] intrigued that this could be a good business option that differentiates them from their competitors." [Builder]

Finally, there was little consensus on the right policy approach, which may mean a mix of policy strategies will be necessary to advance VH more broadly, rather than seeking broad consensus on a single approach. One area of relative agreement was the importance of government leadership on this issue such as mandating visitability for publicly funded housing and land use.

FURTHER READING

Full report:
Barriers and Enablers to the Uptake of Visitable Housing in Canada: Stakeholder perceptions
https://eppdscrmssa01.blob.core.windows.net/cmhcprodcontainer/sf/project/archive/research_2/barriers_and_enablers_jul5_corrected.pdf

Related reading:
Study of the cost of including accessibility features in newly constructed modest houses
ftp://ftp.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/chic-ccdh/Research_Reports-Rapports_de_recherche/eng_bilingual/RR_Cost%20of%20Accessibility_EN_Nov10.pdf

Accessibility of Canadian Seniors' Homes:
ftp://ftp.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/chic-ccdh/Research_Reports-Rapports_de_recherche/2017/RR_Acc_Canadian_Seniors_Homes.pdf

Project Manager: Janet Kreda
Senior Researcher, Housing Needs,
Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation

Consultant: Canadian Centre for Disability Studies

©2018, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
Printed in Canada
Produced by CMHC 27-07-18 69350

cmhc.ca

Although this information product reflects housing experts' current knowledge, it is provided for general information purposes only. Any reliance or action taken based on the information, materials and techniques described are the responsibility of the user. Readers are advised to consult appropriate professional resources to determine what is safe and suitable in their particular case. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation assumes no responsibility for any consequence arising from use of the information, materials and techniques described.